

SOUTH ASIAN CONSULTATIVE WORKSHOP

Needed: Alliance to protect rights of widows and single women

Myra Imran

Islamabad

Women's rights activists and gender experts of South Asian countries stressed on the need for forming a regional alliance to protect rights of widows and single women.

They said that widows and single women are the most marginalised and vulnerable section of South Asian societies and the set of challenges they face is almost the same in all these countries.

They pointed out that the majority of such women remain trapped within a discriminatory traditional framework moulded by rigid precepts of patriarchy. They are secluded from the social fabric and face immense problems with regard to inheritance of property. The speakers said that war and conflict in this region has produced thousands of widows who mostly enjoy no rights in the society and are poorest of the poor.

The speakers pointed out that in most South Asian countries, widows are often blamed for their husbands' death. There are no laws protecting the fundamental rights of these vulnerable population of widows, who suffer from discriminatory legal and government policies. Most widows are unaware of any legal status or their rights to compensation or inheritance. Widows also suffer humiliation and pain under the name of culture and traditions.

They were speaking at a two-day South Asian consultative workshop titled 'Mainstreaming Rights of Widows and Single Women in Public Policy' organised by the Aurat Foundation, in collaboration



ISLAMABAD: Federal Minister for Information and Broadcasting Qamar Zaman Kaira and Goodwill Ambassador for Women's Empowerment Fiza Batool Gilani during the South Asian consultative workshop. — APP

with South Asian Network for Widows' Empowerment in Development (SANWED).

The workshop focuses on issues and challenges faced by widows and single women across South Asia and will aim at creating synergies and linkages at local, regional and international levels for mainstreaming their rights in public policy and institutional frameworks.

The opening session was chaired by Hina Jilani, director of the AGHS and former Special Representative of United Nations Secretary General for Human Rights Defenders, with Goodwill Ambassador for Women's Empowerment Syeda Fiza Batool Gilani and Federal Minister for Information and Broadcasting Qamar Zaman Kaira as guests of honour.

The session was addressed by Director, Widows for Peace through Democracy, UK and international focal person for

SANWED Margaret Owen, Founder, Women for Human Rights (WHR) and General Secretary, SANWED, Nepal, Lily Thapa, Chairperson of Guild for Service, India, Dr. Mohini Giri, Gender Issues Specialist, Former Member UN CEDAW Committee, Bangladesh, Ferdous Ara Begum, Executive Director, ASR Institute of Women Studies, Nighat Said Khan, Former Chairperson National Commission on the Status of Women, Pakistan, Anis Haroon and Ambassador of Norway to Pakistan Cecilie Landsverk.

Margaret Owen said that widows shall be seen as important members of society not as old ladies. They must not be neglected but be cared. "There never has been such a huge explosion in the number of widows as today," she said adding that lack of data on widows is the biggest hurdle in working

for their empowerment.

Lily Thapa from Nepal said that in Nepal most of the young girls are forced to marry older men, which result in greater number of widows. In Nepal, she said, widows are discouraged to participate in daily life activities. She said that Women for Human Rights and SANWED Nepal are struggling hard to empower widows to contribute in Nepal's economy. She said one of their achievement is the change in widows in legal status e.g. Nepali government has changed the law that widows only at the age of 35 would be able to inherit their husband's property.

Starting out in one room, she said that they have 1,025 widows groups in all over the country, with the membership of one hundred thousand young widows, who not only changed discriminatory legal policies from country code,

but were able to mainstream into government development agendas as well.

She demanded that regional bodies like Saarc should take urgent action in implementing Article 32 of the Colombo Declaration for an affirmative action policy to uplift the status of widows in South Asia.

Sharing data on widows in India, Dr. Mohini Thapa said that there are 40 million widows in India, which make 11 per cent of total female population, while in contrast only 2.5 per cent of total Indian men are widowers. About 25 per cent of widows are working outside home and 20 per cent among them are working as agricultural labour. She said that discrimination against widows cuts across all ages, religions, castes and ethnicities. She also recited poetry of Pakistani and Indian poets and said that political tension between Pakistan and India has produced thousands of widows on both sides of the border. "We should take oath that we will never raise our hands to hold guns but to embrace each other."

Programme Coordinator HAWA Programme, Afghanistan, Semin Qasim said that according to an estimate, there are around 700,000 widows in Afghanistan. "There are certain areas where there are all women headed households as men have either died or went missing," she said.

Ferdous Ara Begum said that widowhood remain the most neglected among all human and women's rights issues. She said that in general, widows in Bengal are little better placed as compared to those living in India, Nepal and Pakistan, but widows from the

Hindu population in Bengal face more discriminated than the widows of other religious ethnic groups.

Chief Executive Officer, Vithu, Centre for Human Resource Development, Sri Lanka, Shanthi Anusha Sachithanandam said that Sri Lanka is only country, which does not have quota for women in local government, and only two per cent at upper lever despite high literacy and education rate among women. He talked about the high level of militarisation, which has affected the security of women and widows. She said that most of the children dropping out from school belong to widows. "There are thousands of widows who still do not know about the whereabouts of their husbands," she said.

Nighat Said Khan explained the categories of single women and said that they are not a homogenous group. She said that widows with children and property are the strongest in the hierarchy of single women.

Ambassador of Norway to Pakistan Cecilie Landsverk stressed that for financial empowerment of widows and said that it is important to overhaul the inheritance laws to give widows their due share in land. She also objected on the discriminatory behaviour where only women are addressed as 'widows' but men are hardly addresses as 'widowers'.

Anis Haroon, former chairperson of the National Commission on the Status of Women, said that compared to widowed (whose husbands died), the divorced women are more stigmatised. She said that although some opportunities improved widows' status in urban areas, but situation in rural areas is much worse.

Syeda Fiza Batool Gilani endorsed that not only the widows, but divorced women are more stigmatised and need attention in public policy discourse. "In the absence of a man, a woman becomes a non-entity and has little or no standing in society. Hence, widows and single women become vulnerable to exploitation and discrimination," she said.